

## New York Hustlers: Masculinity and Sex in Modern America

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**Reviewer:** Justin Bengry

Issues related to homosexuality are currently at the forefront of public discourse. Globally, but particularly in the United States, marriage equity, military service, queer youth and bullying are not just matters of policy debate, but have engaged popular concern and action as well. A recent online video, titled *{THIS} is Reteaching Gender and Sexuality*, challenges us to reconsider our understandings of sexuality while drawing attention to the plight of queer youth. In the video, queer youth appear in their own right, demanding a recalibration of how we define sexuality and sexual identities. As two speakers put it, 'I can like boys and girls. ... I can be none of the above'.<sup>(1)</sup> For these young men and women, sexuality need not be defined by hard and fast categories. L, G, B, and T are just letters, not identities. Nor need they be fixed markers of identity across one's lifetime. In light of this charge to question sexual binarisms, Barry Reay's *New York Hustlers* explores a particularly relevant historical issue.

*New York Hustlers* highlights the fluidity and flexibility of sexuality in a period when the homosexual-heterosexual binarism was not yet entrenched. Reay is not primarily interested in the lives of gay or homosexual men, or only of telling a history of homosexuality. Reay's project is instead one of uncovering the social and cultural environment in which a range of male same-sex sex acts were available to men before the concretization of sexual identities in the 1960s and 1970s. He traces this through the 20th century, focusing on the 1940s to the 1960s, through the post-war period to the onset of gay liberation, with significant discussions going beyond this timeline as well.

Throughout the 1940s to the 1960s, Reay argues, hustlers, or male prostitutes who were paid to have sex with other men, and trade, other presumably straight men who also had sex with men, existed in a fluid sexual landscape. Hustlers and trade might have wives, girlfriends, be part of the armed forces, and exhibit all range of otherwise conventional displays of masculinity. But they also had sex with other men. Sometimes they did it for money, sometimes they pursued it in the absence of other sexual opportunities, and other times it was a matter of simple desire. Reay's study is a history of the men, who might identify as heterosexual, but who participated in homosexual acts. This book, then, is as much a study of heterosexuality as it is of homosexuality.

Reay seeks to redress an oversight in the histories of sexuality and homosexuality. While hustlers and trade appear regularly in the historical record and scholarship, they have been given little attention in their own

right. Building on important work by George Chauncey for New York and Matt Houlbrook for London, Reay argues that New York's 'sexual culture of hustlers and trade mirrors the lack of binary division' that Houlbrook found in London, but that the America example 'demonstrate[s] far more sexual fluidity than its English counterpart' (p. 17).<sup>(2)</sup> According to Reay, historians have missed much of the richness and complexity of the period from the 1940s to the 1960s by moving too quickly to the formation of modern gay identities, thereby overlooking continuities remaining from older experiences and understandings of sexuality. Because of this, continuities simply disappear with the coming of a more modern, identifiable and understandable sexual culture.

Reay accesses this other forgotten sexual culture through several key archival collections. Thomas Painter, a diarist, writer and photographer kept a record of New York hustlers for decades, particularly after he became an informant for sex researcher Alfred Kinsey in the early 1940s. Until the 1970s, Painter submitted letters, journals, home movies, photographs, fiction and drawings to Kinsey's research. Reay uses many of the photographs that appear in the book from Painter's collection in the Kinsey Archives at the University of Indiana. As well as the Painter papers, Reay mines a variety of other sometimes previously unused Kinsey sources in this study, in addition to a range of literary, film, legal and sexological sources.

Organizationally the book takes some time to get to its strongest points and evidence chapters. After the introduction, the first chapter 'Contexts' establishes the 'lost' world that Reay seeks to restore to our awareness. Ultimately a continued introduction, 'Contexts' explores the now infamous 1920 naval investigation into homosexual activities on Newport, Rhode Island navy bases. It also offers a close reading of George Henry's study *Sex Variants* (1941). Through these two examples and others, Reay establishes a history of sexual flexibility and of overlapping desires between heterosexual and homosexual men. He shows that homosexual activity was not just situational or functional, for example in prisons or other areas where there were no women. We must consider desire as well. But that desire relied on complex codings of effeminacy and masculinity.

The next two chapters are both the most interesting and the most valuable. They seek to explore 'the untidiness of categories rather than gay-world-making' that authors like Chauncey have thus far taken as their projects. In the chapters 'Hustlers and trade' and 'Sexualities', we learn about the world in which these men existed. Identifying hustlers was never an easy task because although they might subscribe to a body-conscious style of clothes that exposed flesh and muscles, in general their outward aesthetic did not differ substantially from the working class or criminal elements. Authorities sometimes had difficulty, in fact, distinguishing 'hoodlum' from 'pervert' (p. 80). For some men, hustling was a survival strategy or means to participate in the consumer economy, while for others it might offer a stepping-stone into modeling, physique work or acting. Some worked in more organized male brothels or 'peg houses'. But most simply worked the streets, largely indistinguishable from other working-class youth. Many used the money they earned selling sex to other men to pay for dates with women. In the end, most transitioned away from trade toward the life paths of their peers: working-class occupations, marriage and children.

Reay rejects the impulse to define the men he describes as bisexual, a term that held even less meaning for them than homosexual and heterosexual. Many young men exhibited an 'omnisexuality' (p. 114). So long as they remained the masculine penetrator, and the queer man was penetrated, such men's masculinity remained secure and intact. They largely identified as heterosexual, and their homosexual acts did not conflict with that self-identity. Understandings of mid-century sexualities, Reay explains, were much more fluid and flexible than we have previously imagined. Other men who achieved orgasm with effeminate or homosexual men, so long as they did not actively bring their partners to orgasm, similarly felt their masculinity intact and their heterosexuality unblemished. Some, simultaneously involved with women, might not even consider such acts infidelities. 'That's not really sex', relayed one man. 'Sex is something I have with my wife in bed' (p. 129).

The remainder of the book is taken up with chapters on effeminacy and the continuing resonance of hustler and trade imagery. Not until the 1960s did the media and popular culture begin to recognize the complexity

of homosexual identities and practices. And as Reay points out, 1970s masculine homosexual performances like the clone or macho queer owe a great deal to the imagery and iconography of earlier trade. Trade continued to appear elsewhere as well. In his final content chapter, 'Hustler hustled', Reay convincingly demonstrates that 'the hustler and trade are surprisingly ubiquitous in the literary and visual arts of postwar America' (p. 189). Through the work of Andy Warhol, Tennessee Williams, the imagery of James Dean and Marlon Brando, films like the Oscar-winning *Midnight Cowboy*, and myriad other examples, hustlers and trade have been a feature of 20th-century American culture, appearing even in mainstream, commercially successful films, art and literature.

Trade, the larger category into which hustlers also fall, is treated in the book as another sexual category, one that bridges heterosexuality and homosexuality. A man identified as trade was not restricted to homosexual or heterosexual sex acts, but nor could he be labelled homosexual. His heterosexuality was not rigid either. Men defined for themselves what was transgressive or unacceptable. Or they simply enjoyed the range of sexual acts physically available to them to satisfy their desires. As one Wyoming cowhand told a guilt-ridden friend of Gore Vidal's after their sexual encounter in the 1960s: 'You know, you guys from the East do this because you're sick and we do it because we're horny' (p. 237).

Reay describes this sexual landscape in his prologue as a 'lost world' (p. 4), but we have to wonder how lost it really is. Certainly Reay demonstrates that the strict division and patrolling of the space between homosexual men and ostensibly straight or heterosexual men has increased since the sexual fluidity of the period he describes. But, I wonder, to what extent this world has, in fact, disappeared? What areas of it remain? Reay identifies the phenomenon of the 'Down low' or DL in African-American communities, where presumably straight men have homosexual sex. He also notes the 'sexual flexibility' of the 'queer generation' appearing from the 1990s onward (pp. 250–1). But certainly male prostitutes and so-called 'gay for pay' pornographic actors still tread this line. And we continue to see scandals when military men participate in similar sexual economies.<sup>(3)</sup> Further, what effect has the increasing social acceptability of homosexuality had on dismantling rigid sexual binarisms? Many people today choose to define themselves through very particular and sometimes unique understandings of queerness and bisexuality. Then there are the youth in the 'Reteaching' video, for instance, who eschew limiting themselves to rigid sexual categories and identities.

Another issue in Reay's study of hustlers and trade is that for the most part these men are spoken about rather than heard. Many of his sources are from observers of this world. Men like Painter detailed the lives of such men, photographing them, fetishising them and having sex with them. But the men with whom he had sex have little voice in his accounts. Photographs offer insights into self-presentation, to be sure, and body language as well as body modification choices offer points of access into their lives. Yet they are all mediated by the photographer. To what extent are photos staged? To what extent are the men performing particular identities or hiding others? And there are differences of power too. The men who could hire hustlers were in a financial position to do so. Class differences further muddy the relationships between these groups.

Throughout, the book is illustrated with an exciting range of images including many portraits of hustlers taken by Thomas Painter. These are fascinating historical sources in their own right that show a range of staged poses, street scenes, portraits and snap shots. There are also film stills, cartoons and police file shots. While Reay's captions often offer greater context for images, or some analysis, he misses the opportunity to do more with them. They are exciting sources, and reading this interesting book, one turns the page hoping to find further analysis of the images as more than illustrative material to points made in the book. Such analysis does appear, but more extensive use of these sources would have been appreciated.

Reay's writing style is engaging and readily accessible. Scholars will be interested to read the book for its insights into the complex fluidities of sexuality, and engagement with existing literature. Students, even undergraduates, should have little problem grasping its overall themes and arguments. Copiously illustrated and full of concrete examples, *New York Hustlers* will hold the attention of students, even those first

encountering the history of sexuality. They will be better prepared if they already have a knowledge of work by George Chauncey, Eve Sedgwick, Matt Houlbrook and others, but it is certainly not critical that they have been immersed in the history and theory of sexuality to understand this book. Individual chapters could be assigned to undergrads.

Reay concludes by arguing that the 'shift in sexual configurations from acts to identities (homosexual and heterosexual), supposedly in place by the mid-twentieth century' is complicated by the experiences and lives of the hustlers and trade he has uncovered (p. 254). His story surpasses local histories of New York, offering instead insights into sexual cultures of America, and perhaps beyond as well. What he has also created is not just a history of homosexuality, but also a history of heterosexuality, and the complex and fluid understandings of sexuality that overlapped, conflicted, and rubbed up against these constructs. In the end, Reay's study is not just a study of the hustlers who sold their bodies on the streets of New York. He has successfully produced an engaging, interesting, thought-provoking study that, rather than being a history of homosexuality, is a history of sexual diversity, and is certainly a study which will encourage wider historical investigation.

In his introduction, Reay expresses his desire that the history of hustlers and trade 'challenges our notions of both heterosexuality and homosexuality' (p. 17). In fact, his exploration of sexual fluidity shows a past without rigid identity binaries. Such flexibility is clearly not new, nor necessarily radical, and it need not be subversive or dangerous. In fact, it seems clear that it was a very natural, normal and unproblematic experience of sexuality for many men in mid-century New York, and very likely other places as well. So besides being intellectually challenging and historically engaging, this understanding of sexuality is also relevant. And as the youth in the *{THIS} is Reteaching Gender and Sexuality* video demonstrate, sexual flexibility is experienced today by many more men and women, youth and elders, than just the trade and hustlers in Reay's study. This book can make us think as much about our present as our past.

## Notes

1. '{THIS} is Reteaching Gender and Sexuality', <<http://vimeo.com/17101589>> [2] [accessed 24 November 2010]. This online video is in part a response to Seattle columnist Dan Savage's 'It Gets Better Project', which started on YouTube, but owing to its success soon migrated to its own domain <<http://www.itgetsbetter.org> [3]> [accessed 17 December 2010]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York, 1994); Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918–1957* (Chicago, 2005). I'm not immediately convinced that the US example is *more* fluid than the British. Houlbrook certainly finds sexual fluidity among British working-class men, guardsmen and others, but his primary focus is on the increasing power of homosexual identities that adhered to middle-class values of respectability and privacy. Though Houlbrook's subject is related, his questions, sources and historical actors only overlap imperfectly with Reay's, and so direct comparison is difficult. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. In 2006, members of the 82nd Airborne division stationed at Fort Bragg, NC were court-martialed following discovery of their appearance on the gay porn site *acteduty.com*. Queer British writer and commentator Mark Simpson's evaluation critiqued those who thought these men *must* be gay because they participated in gay sex. See Mark Simpson, 'Sexual outlaws: "gay for pay" paratroopers', originally posted 25 August 2006 <<http://www.marksimpson.com/blog/2006/08/25/sexual-outlaws-gay-for-pay-paratroopers-given-a-dressing-down-by-gay-novelist/> [4]> [accessed 30 November 2010]. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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